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**Forgotten feminists: The Federation of British
Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969.**

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considered preliminary.**

Forgotten feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969.

Linda Perriton

The research that I have been undertaking during my study leave is the start of a two-part project into women's business networks. Recently it has become more common to hear that women's networks – either external or internal to an organisation – are ways for women to gain ground in terms of their professional status and opportunities. There has also been a recent spate of media articles and reports on women's networks. This is in part the result of a deliberate media presence on behalf of Catalyst, the US based women's organisation and partly interest in women such as Glenda Stone, who has recently come to prominence by creating the Aurora Network (formerly known as Busygirls). 'Gender capital management', (as Aurora like to refer to strategies for being a woman in professional life) has, for the moment at least, identified women's networks as the next big idea in achieving equality of opportunity.

However, it is difficult to know how to conceptualise these networks – are they contemporary forms of women's activism or 'clubs' that exist, in part, to allow women to market services and products to other women? Are they associations based on calculated self-interest or do they represent a new form of gender solidarity? Are they as forward thinking as they often claim or are they deeply conservative? In order to answer some of these questions I designed a comparative research project, looking at historical forms of women's business networks and contemporary forms.

The first stage of the research involves studying the papers of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women (or 'the Federation', for short). The Federation was formed in 1935 and was active until the end of the 1960s, finally winding up in 1968. At its peak it represented, through its affiliated professional associations, about 100,000 working women across a number of different professional and industrial sectors.

I'd like to use today's seminar to do a couple of things that would be helpful in taking this research forward. There are a number of different tales that can be told about the Federation and I'd like to share a couple of those with you in the next hour. But the question for me as I look at all the archive material I have collected is to decide what story would be the *most* useful or challenging for a *management* audience to hear. So it would be helpful to me today if you gave me some feedback on what interests you most about some of these 'reality tales'. The second thing that would be personally helpful is if you have questions about *contemporary* women's networks that could be worked into the interviews with contemporary networkers.

So, my plan today is to talk about the history of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women. And, because time is short (and so is my study leave), I'm going to do that by focusing on three particular time periods because I feel that they are illustrative of the aims, approaches and of the difficulties encountered by the Federation. The first period I want to look at is the formative years 1933-1935 in order to consider the social and political conditions which brought about the perceived need for such an organisation, the second period is circa 1951-1953 when the Federation was in its organisational adulthood and the third and final period is the 'crisis year' of 1959, when it was first suggested that the Federation should fold. I realise – if there is anyone in the audience familiar with the Federation - that the decision not to concentrate on the war years could be seen as somewhat contentious. After all it is most likely that people will have come across mention of the Federation, if they have come across them at all, in relation to their work during the Second World War in helping to create the Women Power Committee and also for their successful campaign in the immediate post-war period in securing equal compensation for men and women injured during the war. But, although the war was important not only for the achievements of the Women Power Committee but also in the way that the Federation created links with women parliamentarians across the political divide, it is perhaps not particularly representative of the day-to-day activism of the Federation.

As such the structure of today's seminar is as follows; I'll talk first about the three periods in the Federation's history as outlined above and then in the final section I'd like to bring in some possible interpretive schemes – perhaps ones that appeal to the

different constituencies and audiences represented in the room this afternoon. So, if you are sitting comfortably, I'll begin.

1. Finding a political voice. 1933-1935

The first Annual General Meeting of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's **Clubs** was held at Craig's Court Restaurant, in London, on Monday April 23rd 1934. Miss Sangster, who was chairing the meeting in her capacity as President, was in reflective mood that evening and in her speech to the assembled committee members, she had much to say about women, globalisation and the power of organising. There was no doubt in her mind that the Federation – and the International body to which it was affiliated – were not just needed as a way of providing a forum for business and professional women but as a means of 'internationalising' women of all nations. Although before the First World War she had been a "violent nationalist" that conflict had revealed to her how important it was for women to work across national borders to build understanding.¹

The belief in, and promotion of, international women's co-operation remained central to the activities of the Federation throughout its history. And this is no real surprise given the impetus behind the formation of the Federation in the UK. The International Federation of Business and Professional Women was formed in 1930 as a result of the efforts of the American Federation – an organisation that could trace its own history back to 1919. In the 1930s the International Federation was headed by the charismatic, Dr Lena Madesin Phillips, who promoted the benefits of affiliation to the parent organisation to, it seems, just about anyone that would listen and in 1933 the UK formed its own organisation and joined too. Although the British Federation was free to create its own constitution and fight its own campaigns, affiliation to the International organisation brought it with it the necessity to conform to its rules and by-laws. One particular by-law of the International Federation was to be a long-running thorn in the Federation's side. And, if we return to the AGM of 1934, we can see the genesis of the 'clubs' issue in the minutes.

¹ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, 1934

A question was raised by Miss McMillan as to whether

‘professional and Trade Associations of women were eligible for membership, whether the word [‘club’] was interpreted in its very wide American sense or in the narrower English sense’²

The question was a highly political one in the context of the meeting, for the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs consisted at that time of what can be thought of as two broad categories of groups. The first were social clubs that represented women in particular trades, industry or professional sectors (e.g. Women’s Advertising Club). The second type were modelled on male Rotary Clubs where women of all professions could meet socially (e.g. The Alpha Club or the Provisional Club). Whilst it might – from a contemporary perspective - be expected that clarification was sought as to whether **social** clubs should be admitted, it was the inclusion of professional and trade organisations that caused disquiet in 1934. But the motion was duly passed to ask the International Federation whether or not they intended that membership included such bodies³.

By September 1934 the Federation had received its answer and at that month’s meeting it was announced that the International Federation had made a ruling and that consequently “the whole basis of the British Federation would have to be reconsidered at a future meeting⁴”. The meeting to consider the issue, which the correspondence reveals was an extremely lively and contentious one, took place in January of 1935.

Caroline Haslett, as Chair of the Executive Council of the Federation, chaired the overall meeting and announced to the assembled members that:

² WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, 1934

³ How much an issue this was for the majority of women who came together under the banner of the Federation is difficult to tell. For instance, Caroline Haslett, the President of the Women’s Electrical Association, was listed on the minutes in the period 1933-35 next to her Provisional Club association rather than her professional group. The criticism made of the British Federation some years later, that they did not consider British women to be “club minded” (Hall, 1963, p. 6), does not marry with the picture, in 1935, of *multiple* club membership amongst the representatives.

⁴ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, 1934

“At the last Board meeting of the International Federation ... a ruling had been given as to the interpretation of the word ‘club’, which had very different significance in the US and apparently elsewhere from that attached to it in this country. The International Board held that any organisation composed of at least 75% of Business and Professional Women was eligible for membership in the Federation, and the Council of the British Federation had therefore thought it wise to call this meeting to confer with other organisations as to the wisdom and utility of so altering the constitution of the British Federation as to admit such organisations.....⁵”

The suggestion that they might consider “the wisdom and utility of so altering the constitution” hardly conveyed the significance of the decision about to be taken. What in fact this motion provided was an opportunity to debate the need for an organisation that would have much wider aspirations than furthering women’s friendship, talents or understanding. It was a motion that provoked a long debate about the need for an organisation that would “facilitate the circulation of information ... prevent overlapping and to provide machinery through which these bodies could voice their common views and **take common action where necessary**”. This was, from the outset, a change that would create an organisation *designed* to be active in the political, social and economic arena.

The politicisation of the Federation was clearly a difficult issue for many connected to the organisation in its original conception. Hitherto the subject of politics, and of collective action, had been deflected whenever it had been raised at meetings. For example, at the AGM of 1934 there were two attempts to include overtly political issues as part of the business of the evening. A member asked if it were within the competence of the meeting to pass a Resolution “in connection with matters affecting the interests of seamen” but this was quickly ruled out by the President as being outwith the scope of the Federation. The second was not so easily sidelined. Miss McMillan proposed that a resolution should be passed protesting against the government proposal to ban women from working in the mines. Although supported by other members it was eventually decided that:

⁵ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, 1935

“it was undesirable for any meeting to pass resolutions expressing definite opinions without any information or study of the subject involved. It was suggested that study circles which could take up matters like those already raised might be formed next Autumn and that those circles could then report and recommend action to their various clubs and through the clubs the Federation, so that any Resolution sent forward should really have the support of the membership behind it⁶.”

This mechanism for ensuring support for resolutions that expressed a political or social view, of course, removed all possibility of the Federation behaving as an activist or lobbying organisation. But there had always been resistance within the Federation to being seen as politically active – especially in speaking out in support of women’s issues – and the Federation’s constitution had a by-law enshrining the principles of being non-sectarian and non-political. Certainly in debating whether this by-law was enough of a safeguard against political action it was acknowledged, “any action taken in support of women’s work generally would almost inevitably be regarded as both partisan and contentious”.

The removal of the political potential of the organisation clearly rankled with a number of members. Throughout the short life of the Federation of Clubs there were occasions when this political v. non-political status was a visible fault line running through the organisation. For example, in 1933 the Women’s Advertising Club submitted correspondence advertising a meeting on “The Married Woman’s Right to Earn”, and again in January 1934 they asked the Executive Council for a financial contribution from the Federation in support of a public meeting demanding equal pay for equal work⁷. Whilst there was (cautious) acceptance that the general principle of Equal Pay seemed equitable there was no question of a financial contribution being made. And it is difficult not to hear the note of smug satisfaction in the minutes of the next meeting when it was recorded that:

“A report on the mass meetings for equal pay for married women had been received, together with accounts which showed a considerable loss, so that the

⁶ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the Executive Council of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs

⁷ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs

Federation's actions in refusing to be identified in these efforts was felt to have been proved extremely wise⁸."

But if not an organisation conceived with the idea of furthering the political, social and economic status of women what was the earliest incarnation of the Federation for? The standing items on the agendas of the meetings of the period 1933-1935 show an organisation keen to exploit the access to women and opportunities abroad through the link to the International Federation in Geneva. The opportunities were not primarily commercial in the sense of opening up markets for women entrepreneurs – the activities of the 'Commercial Exchange' sub-committee being largely confined to compiling a list of shops and offices owned by members "so that members visiting other countries could patronise their colleagues' [businesses]..."⁹ It was the 'Fine Arts' sub-committee that was far more active in this period. Its aim was "to assist members in making contact with artists in other countries and to keep them informed of opportunities for making their work known." And, indeed, the Federation was very successful in this regard – organising the exhibition of the work of several artist members in Europe in 1933 and 1934.

The resolution to set up the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's Organisations was carried at the meeting in 1935: 18 in favour, three abstentions and none against. It appears – that despite the final result of the vote – that the debate was a lively one and feelings ran high. Yet the sticking point was not the use of the Federation for political purposes but in the status of the clubs in the new Federation. If the Federation was to provide a link for professional and business women to work together through their industry or professional bodies, then what was to become of the clubs formed for more social ends? The issue was fudged somewhat at the actual meeting – with Caroline Haslett declaring that the idea of professional and business women working together was too important to founder on a relatively minor point – and the vote was won. But subsequent to the meeting three 'clubs', which could not meet the 75% rule were not permitted to affiliate with the new Federation.

⁸ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs

⁹ WL 6/BFB/166 Minutes of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs

Almost immediately upon formation the ‘new’ British Federation of Business and Professional Women threw themselves into a more political agenda. The minutes of the first meeting in April 1935 noted under “Outline of Work to be Undertaken” that the Federation had already written to the International Labour Organisation asking them to receive a deputation on the action of Britain in excluding women from mine working, even when they were employed in a technical or professional capacity. They also agreed to ally themselves to the question of young persons unemployment, noted that a woman MP was taking some action on the topic in Parliament and empowered one of their council members to “take any steps she felt desirable” in the matter. The Federation also took a strong interest in the “Status of Women” committee at the United Nations, noting that present information on the comparative status of women in each country was insufficient and that a survey would need to be taken.

But the minutes also reveal the extent to which the British Federation recognised that it was out of step politically with the International Federation in Geneva. The council observed, “... the Equal Rights International was not in favour at Geneva as it is too feministic in its outlook¹⁰”. It was agreed that the way around looking ‘too feministic’ was to provide empirical evidence of loss of ground and reduction in status and that a survey for this purpose should be undertaken.

The political dye of the new organisation was cast.

2. A Distinguished Middle Age? The BFBPW 1951-1953.

The British Federation for Business and Professional Women arguably reached the height of its influence on British domestic politics during the Second World War and the immediate post-war years. In 1940, when it became clear that women were not being employed in areas where there were known labour shortages, the Federation approached several women MPs to raise the issue. As a direct result of discussions between Nancy Astor and Caroline Haslett, the Women Power Committee was formed to protect the interests of British women during the war. The Federation also became involved in the issue of unequal compensation payments for (civilian) men

¹⁰ WL/6/BFB/166 Minutes of the Executive Committee of the British Federation of Business and Professional Women 1935

and women who were unable to work as a result of injuries sustained in the war. The scheme, which offered lower compensation to women, was opposed by many women's organisations but the successful campaign to have the legislation overturned was jointly co-ordinated by the National Association of Women Civil Servants¹¹ and the British Federation.

In 1951 the Federation was still growing - albeit at a hardly stellar rate but at this time represented some 90,000 women in Britain, up from 68,000 women in 1941. It reported to the International Federation that year that it had affiliated 20 new clubs¹². Much of its work on behalf of their members in the post-war period focused on the issue of Equal Pay. The 'new' Federation had always supported equal pay for women and each issue of its quarterly publication "Women at Work" reminded members that its aims were:

“...[to protect] the economic status of business and professional women and their inclusion in all branches of Industry, in newly formed government departments, and in the services, on the same basis as men where the qualifications are equal¹³”.

During this period the Federation joined with other women's groups in supporting causes that united all women. And – in direct contrast to the policy of the earlier incarnation of the Federation – supported those causes financially. For example, the Federation gave funds in support of the production of Jill Craigie's film on equal pay, "To be a Woman" and promoted its screening in London. The Federation played a leading part in the Equal Pay Campaign and Federation members were represented on the central and advisory committees of the organisation.

The Federation in the early 1950s campaigned in three distinct ways; it continued to campaign in its own right and on behalf of its own member organisations such as the National Association for Women Civil Servants for Equal Pay and the removal of the

¹¹ The National Association of Women Civil Servants were affiliated to the British Federation.

¹² WL/6/BFB/155 Report of the Membership Committee, Agenda papers of the Board meeting of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, New York, June 22-26, 1952.

¹³ WL/6/BFB/165 British Federation of Business and Professional Women (1951) Women at Work, London: British Federation of Business and Professional Women, Winter, p. 3

marriage bar; it also joined with other women's groups on projects such as the Equal Pay Campaign and it was active, via the International Federation, in the work of the United Nations and, especially, the ILO.

The use of this multi-channel approach to activism meant that the Federation was often working in quite varied contexts when it came to scale and audience of their campaigns. For example in 1953, the Federation wrote to women MPs ahead of the annual budget speech to ask them to raise the issue of equal pay in the Commons debate following the Chancellor's speech. The correspondence shows just how small scale some of their campaigns were – and what entrenched attitudes there were to the issue of Equal Pay at that time.

In her response to the Federation's letter, Eirene White the Labour MP, replied rather curtly that:

“You will, by now, have realised that the Chancellor has no intention in this financial year of doing anything about equal pay. There was no reference to it in his budget speech¹⁴.”

The MP, did however, assure the Federation of her continuing commitment to forwarding the movement. Irene Ward, who had worked closely with the Federation during the Women Power Committee years, was hardly more encouraging in her assessment of the chances of the matter being raised – or whether it should be.

“I cannot say whether I can raise the matter of Equal Pay on the Budget Debate or not as it entirely depends whether one catches the Speaker's eye and I cannot say whether I feel at the moment that any good purpose would be served by doing so¹⁵.”

But Irene Ward was an experienced parliamentarian and was ready with some further advice as to how the issue could, nonetheless, be kept on the agenda.

¹⁴ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence Eirene White, MP to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 16th April 1953

¹⁵ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence Irene Ward, MP to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 15th April 1953

“If the worst happens and no move at all is made in the Budget I think that it will be much more appropriate to organise a deputation with all the principal bodies interested to make representations to the Chancellor, The Minister of Education and the Minister of Labour and The Minister of Local Government and Planning, and that you should ask MPs from all parties in the house to lead the deputation¹⁶.”

And in the closing paragraph of the letter she pointed out a small victory that *may* be possible to win. It had come to her notice that women legal staff – who would be paid at equal rates to men in private practice – were being paid at a lower rate when they were employed by the Civil Service. The Federation accepted the suggestion and followed that lead as well by writing to contacts within the National Association of Women Civil Servants requesting information. A formal protest letter was duly sent to the Bar Council deploring this practice and asking them to take action¹⁷. As for the idea, duly circulated to member organisations and to the Equal Pay Campaign, that there should be a delegation to ministers to include cross-party representation of MPs ... the somewhat weary response came back from the EPC Committee that:

“The majority of the committee felt that no useful purpose would be served by approaching ministers other than the Chancellor, and, it was also pointed out that the Campaign Committee had, only last year, taken a deputation to the Minister of Education, whose reply was that the responsibility lay with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I, myself, think that a deputation led by MPs should be more useful than those taken by the Campaign Committee alone¹⁸.”

The Federation’s campaign on behalf of women barristers in the Civil Service affected 24 women. The Equal Pay campaign impacted on considerably more, of

¹⁶ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence Irene Ward, MP to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 15th April 1953

¹⁷ WL/6/BFB/166 Draft document (undated) included in the file of correspondence between Mary Price, National Association of Women Civil Servants and Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, April – November 1953
The National Association of Women Civil Servants considered the wording of the original draft a little too strong – requesting that the following paragraph was removed.

“The fact that the services of a qualified woman may be obtained more cheaply than those of a man may have some bearing on the fact that the number of legally qualified women in the Civil Service has almost trebled since 1948...”

¹⁸ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence Miss H Hart, General Secretary to the Equal Pay Campaign Committee to Miss G Knight, Hon Secretary, BFBPW, 23rd April 1953

course, but the methods were largely the same – endless letter-writing, awareness of the timing of parliamentary debates, patient lobbying, following up possible avenues for progressing the cause – even if it was to gain an advantage for just a few women. But, as I mentioned in the start of this section, the Federation also worked – through the International Federation – in pursuing women's rights through the institutions of the United Nations. The International Federation had consultative status to the Social and Economic Council of the UN, its committees and specialised agencies. This meant that the International Federation sent representatives or observers and made submissions to such commissions as the International Labour Organisation, UNESCO, the IMF and World Health Organisation. And in the period under review, 1951-1953 the British Federation was well represented at meetings of the UN – perhaps as a result of Caroline Haslett assuming the Chair of the International Federation in 1951.

In the year 1952 the Federation submitted statements on educational opportunities for women, the political rights and education of women, took part in the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations and worked on projects for the Commission on the Status of Women. Whilst interested in the work of all these committees (the International Federation had quite definite views, for instance, on the drafting of the Declaration of Human Rights) some issues were more directly relevant to the domestic agenda of the British Federation – mostly those dealt with under the auspices of the Commission on the Status of Women. This body dealt with policy and research on issues such as the vocational and technical education of women, where even in relatively advanced nations there was little provision for women to enter the skilled trades. And to illustrate how contemporary sounding their agenda sounds fifty years later they discussed whether part-time work for women was, in reality, a form of unemployment, the difficulties of balancing child care responsibilities with work and also the special problems that faced older women workers. The equal pay issue was also the preserve of the Status of Women Commission and it was in June 1951 that the International Labour Conference adopted a convention concerning equal pay for work of equal value.

At the Sixth Session of the Commission in 1952, the Commission itself passed a resolution requesting the Economic and Social Council to recommend member states

of the ILO to introduce legislation to enshrine the principle. Mary Sutherland, who was representing the International Federation at that meeting, abstained. She explained her vote by saying that she had no alternative but to abstain, given that the UK government's position on Equal Pay "was the same today as it had been at the three preceding sessions of the Commission and at the 34th ILO Conference..." That is, the UK government had no intention of ratifying the convention – on economic grounds¹⁹.

If the politics and approach to activism of the British Federation had changed in the years since 1935, it wasn't necessarily the case that the International Federation had changed its hostility to anything that looked 'too feministic'. When Bergliot Lie, representing the International Federation, spoke to an ILO advisory committee on employment matters she felt she had to defend the existence of a separate women's organisation in the field. Lie agreed that most problems in employment were of a 'general character', which were of concern to men and women salaried and professional employees. She added that the International Federation "have no wish to deal with the so-called women's problems only". However, in addition to general questions affecting both sexes, Lie pointed out that there were *additional* problems that affected women professional workers. These issues that comprised social conditions, maternity, working conditions, protection, employment conditions and economic position of women as a whole would be forgotten if women themselves did not point them out and seek to improve their situation. It was for *this* reason – and not of ones of feminism per se - that women's organisations and special committees existed²⁰.

But perhaps we should not judge Bergliot Lie too harshly. She also took the opportunity to take the Chairman to task for the wholly male representation on his committee – pointing to a provision in the ILO constitution that when issues concerning women were to be raised that women should be represented.

¹⁹ WL/6/BFB/155 Review of the Sixth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Agenda papers of the Board meeting of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, New York, June 22-26, 1952.

²⁰ WL/6/BFB/155 Report of the ILO Advisory Committee on Salaried Employees and Professional Workers, Second Session, Geneva, 18 Feb to 1 March 1952, Agenda papers of the Board meeting of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, New York, June 22-26, 1952.

3. The ‘crisis’ year - 1959

When Dame Vera Laughton Mathews assumed the Presidency of the British Federation in 1958 she took charge of an organisation that was in some difficulty. By 1958/59 it was clear that the finances of the Federation – always a cause for concern – were now in dire straits. Even the search for a prominent woman to take on the job of National President had been a long and complex one with many rebuffs and rejections along the way. Several women who had been close to the Federation during its history – some of them MPs who had helped the campaigns of the Federation in the past – had been approached, but none had felt able to help.

Dame Vera’s appointment, therefore, was much in the vein of a once-successful corporation looking for a ‘trouble-shooter’ CEO whose first task on arrival would be to develop a strategy for turning around the organisation. The problems facing the Federation were financial. Their income was solely derived from the fees that member organisations paid to them and throughout the latter half of the 1950s the affiliated organisations were themselves losing membership, suffering financially and either disbanding or not able to pay their affiliation fees. This resulted in the somewhat bitter observation by one member of the Federation that whilst it had worked hard for women to achieve higher wages it seemed women were not willing to spare any of this bounty in supporting the organisations that had made it possible²¹. In addition, the secretarial and other services such as space in which to hold meetings, which often used to be freely provided by member organisations were now having to be purchased, placing further strain upon the finances.

The only solution, Dame Vera concluded, was to merge with the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs. And so it is at this stage of our story that we need to loop back to 1935 and consider what happened to the ‘clubs’ issue after the decision to centre the new federation around trade and professional organisations. The UK was unusual – even unique – in its affiliation to the International Federation based, as it was, around this idea of an umbrella organisation

²¹ WL/6/BFB/166 Papers of the ‘Ad hoc’ committee, 1959.

for women's trade and professional groups. The much more common model in other countries was for women to form clubs in geographical locations and to invite women of all business and professional backgrounds to join. In 1936, after Miss Gordon Holmes had been one of the guest speakers at the International Federation meeting in Paris, Dr Lena Madesin Philips approached her with the suggestion that there was still scope within the UK to run clubs on this model. Gordon Holmes was an enthusiastic convert to the idea and the first clubs were formed in London in 1938 after the International Federation sent over a representative to help set them up (Walker, 1964). Caroline Haslett, as Chair of the British Federation, was involved in the intervening period in discussions as to how the clubs would function, but after the establishment of the clubs there was very little interaction between the two competing organisations until 1946.

At the 1946 meeting of the International Federation the anomalous position of the UK was discussed. The constitution of the International Federation dictated that only one organisation could hold the affiliation for a country, yet the rapid growth of the clubs (and the financial contribution that the UK made to the International Federation) meant that there was some eagerness for a solution to the impasse to be found. A very British compromise was found in the suggestion that a 'Bridge Committee' should be formed between the two UK organisations and that it should be the Bridge Committee, operating under the name of the UNITED Federations of Business and Professional Women of Great Britain that was affiliated to the International Federation.

So it was to Clubs that Dame Vera turned to early in 1959 in order to find a solution to the Federation's problems. She was met with a very democratic rebuff. The Committee were not in a position to act unilaterally on the proposal and the AGM of the Clubs was not until the October but, even if it did go to the vote at the AGM, it was unlikely that the clubs would vote for a merger²². Ironically the Clubs operated the same decision-making mechanism that had thwarted the political activism of the early federation – i.e. the insistence that the separate clubs should be briefed

²² WL/6/BFB/166 Miscellaneous correspondence of the Executive Committee, 1959

independently, decisions made locally and then discussed at national level to make sure that they were fully supported.

There was a further blow to the Federation in looking for a survival plan with the death of Vera Laughton Mathews in July 1959. The Executive Committee looked again at the options, but with funds so low that they knew they would not be able to pay the subscription fee to the International Federation the next year, the committee felt that it had no option but to write to all member organisations and supporters to recommend the dissolution of the federation.

The letter acknowledged the number and range of problems that it faced:

“For a number of years it has been apparent that the federation has not had the interest and support that it once enjoyed from all its constituent organs. Moreover, a number of organisations have left the federation and efforts to replace them by others have been unsuccessful. It is not difficult to see how this position has arisen. The professional bodies themselves have problems of retaining and recruiting members of meeting rising costs, of finding officers and committee members willing to give service. They have found it increasingly onerous to play their proper part in the federation and to pay their subscriptions to it, particularly as its work seemed to perhaps offer little of concrete value to their individual members; whilst in sympathy with its objectives and its national and international objectives, they have not been able from their limited resources of time and money to continue to aid its work. In addition, some bodies once members of the federations and among its keenest supporters in both money and service have themselves dissolved, largely achieved the limited objectives for which they were set up²³.”

The Executive Committee did not believe that its work was done – in fact one of the issues for them was that the volume of work at international level that they were involved with was increasing – only that they did not have the bodies or the resources

²³ WL/6/BFB/166 Letter to member organisations on behalf of the BFBPW signed by HC Hart (Chairman), J Frith (VC) and H Sutherland (VC), September 1959

to cope with the demand. With the tone and manner somewhat reminiscent of Edward VIII's abdication speech, the letter stated:

“The officers and Executive Committee find themselves in agreement with Dame Vera's views that the financial problems of the BF are impossible of solution without the closest co-operation of the clubs, and that dissolution is therefore inevitable²⁴”.

Almost inevitably, given the history of meetings of the Federation when major changes were proposed, the AGM called to discuss the proposals was a fiery one. And it was interestingly enough, given the context in which we are hearing this tale today, the British Federation of University Women who shouted the loudest and the longest in protest at the suggestion of dissolution. They argued that the federation represented a true cross-section of working women, that it had no category status, or academic qualification of eligibility, no religious or political bias and that it included amongst its membership “the distinguished, the clerk and the shopgirl and the professional worker”. They believed that the heterogeneous nature of the federation was its strength and to throw away a link to the UN when the influence of NGOs was on the rise was madness. Finally, they declared that they hoped “that the faint-hearted or defeatist elements will gird up their loins and decide to fight on²⁵”.

Loins *were* girded and the motion to dissolve the federation was defeated. The Executive Committee that suggested the motion was removed and an interim ad hoc committee was formed in order to oversee the reorganisation of the Federation. That committee drew up a ‘schedule of future works’ in order to show to any prospective new President the campaigns they still felt were left to fight.

“to bring equal pay to fruition everywhere

1. to make equal opportunity a reality

a. by ensuring that all trainings and all posts are open to women equally with men

²⁴ WL/6/BFB/166 Letter to member organisations on behalf of the BFBPW signed by HC Hart (Chairman), J Frith (VC) and H Sutherland (VC), September 1959

²⁵ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence from British Federation of University Women to Executive Committee of the BFBPW, September 1959

- b. by encouraging women to work for the highest standard of qualification and performance in all business and professions
- 2. to undertake research and propaganda on subjects closely affecting the lives and careers of business and professional women, for example
 - a. housing for single business and professional women, working and retired
 - b. retirement age, conditions and benefits.
 - c. Educational opportunities and treatment of 'the bulge'
 - d. Automation and its effect on work inside the home and in business. Will it help women to solve some of the problems of running a home and a career? Can it create useful leisure?
 - e. The position of married women in employment and national insurance
 - f. *The re-entry of married women into employment*
 - g. *Domestic help for business and professional women*
- 3. to interest women in the economic and financial structure of the country with a view to gaining their admission to the Stock Exchange, the banks and financial corporations, and helping them to play a greater part in determining the future of the country
- 4. to make Business and Professional women increasingly conscious of the social and economic problems arising out of the scientific developments of the present day which will affect the future of the country
- 5. To provide a link between business and professional women and the women members of the house of commons and the house of lords and to be a source of information to members of parliament about organised opinion among trained and educated women.
- 6. *to encourage women to participate in the negotiating machinery to ensure adequate representation of professional men and women at ILO*²⁶

And indeed, Lady Davidson, Conservative MP and a former Westminster diarist for the in-house publication of the Federation, was so impressed that she agreed to become the President later that year.

Although the motion for dissolution was defeated in 1959, the difficulties of resourcing the federation on a fee paid basis did not disappear. The 'crisis' might have prompted the injection of capital in the short-term but the problems of decreasing membership, lack of volunteers and inability to resource the international workload would eventually lead to the inevitable. The federation would last another decade before finally dissolving in 1969. The motion noted:

“whilst appreciating that the Federation has achieved many successes and holds a position of prestige, resolves that in view of the growing recognition of

²⁶ WL/6/BFB/166 Papers of the 'Ad hoc' committee, 1960.

women in business and professional life and the changed climate of opinion today, the Federation be dissolved by the end of 1969...²⁷”

This time there were no voices urging loins to be girded or for iron resolve to save the federation and in 1971, after all the necessary formalities were completed, it sent its papers and a cheque for £74.14, which represented its final assets, to the Fawcett Society²⁸.

4. Yes, but what does it all mean?

In the final section of this paper I would like to look at different ways in which we might understand or write up the history of the Federation to appeal to different audiences within the management community. I think there are (at least) two possible papers arising out of this research that would be valid in a management context; a) that the history of the British Federation is an important contribution to writing a ‘herstory’ of management and that (in a rather sexy way as far as Critical Management Studies is concerned) it creates in one fell swoop a feminist *and* activist past for the CMS community to salivate over and, b) that we can examine the past forms of business women’s networks to increase our understanding of present ones and perhaps to critique them. Because of the shortage of time I’ll spend most time looking at the issue of the creation of a feminist and activist past for CMS and then just touch on the other two.

Creating a heritage of criticality within management

Let me deal first with the possibility of using the history of the Federation as a way of creating a critical past that could be claimed by the Critical Management Community. One of the tensions within the CMS literature is the problem of how to position the manager in the discourse of criticality. The problem being that the manager is written about as both subject in need of emancipation *and/or* as an agent of oppression for the workers. A great deal of the literature is now moving towards the imagining of possible future organisational forms which alleviates this paradoxical positioning of

²⁷ WL/6/BFB/164 Minutes of the AGM, 1969

²⁸ WL/6/BFB/166 Correspondence between Lady Davidson, BFBPW to Miss K Halpin, Fawcett Society (undated)

the manager, but its focus in the past has been on ways in which managers can operate in ways which enables them to be agents of positive organisational change. But most of this literature is about what managers can do to organise, not what they have done in the past.

In this respect, the history of the Federation creates a useful historical example of resistance and social, economic and political activism by the managerial classes. No longer are we forced to point to contemporary examples of critical reflection or the like to illustrate that the management and professional classes are capable of pursuing an activist agenda – we now have a useful critical heritage that can be mined also. How, for example, does the knowledge that professional and trade associations have been used effectively in the past for lobbying for ‘positive’ social outcomes change our view of their potential to do the same in the present day? How could organisations, based on a similar model to that of the Federation, work within the existing lobbying systems on a more radicalised agenda? Could there be ways in which representative organisations, such as the Confederation of British Industry, actually hold transformative potential?

But criticality of this variety is, more often than not, a game for the boys. And, after all, why should feminists give their history over to CMS in order to operationalize? The history of management is a male one, as is the history of management theory. The writing of women into management studies is a minute proportion of the writing on management overall, and often what writing there is positions women as a contemporary ‘problem’ or focus on their identities as managers. As a result there are precious few ‘herstories’ written in the field, in which case an account of the Federation might be a welcome addition, especially as it fits so neatly within a history of the women’s movement generally in the inter-war years.

And the historical perspective does allow us to see the ‘rise and fall’ (for want of a better term) of the Federation in the context of other women’s organisations at that time. Beaumont (2000) has noted that the period after the granting of suffrage in 1928 has been characterised as one of decline for the women’s movement in Britain. Histories of the inter-war period tend to chart the decline of the former suffrage societies such as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, the Women’s

Freedom League, the Six Point Group and the Open Door Council. Typical reasons put forward for the decline include the feeling from former suffragettes that the need for women-only pressure groups had passed and women choosing instead to join mainstream political parties or peace groups. New recruits were difficult to find because, it is assumed, that they were more interested in pursuing new employment opportunities, social lives (and marriage) rather than volunteering for women's groups (Beaumont, 2000).

Not all former suffragettes moved into party politics or the peace movement. And, whilst falling membership might have weakened their societies in the 1930's and rendered them ineffectual, the membership of the Federation was steadily rising through the 1930s. After suffrage was achieved many former activists moved into specialist campaigning areas according to their own interests – thus the suffrage movement did not fade away, but rather dispersed into campaigns that were of most interest to the individual, be it employment status, health, welfare or birth control. Suffragettes can pop up in the most unexpected of places too. The papers of the Federation include a copy of the apologetic letter sent to Teresa Billington-Grieg after the meeting to exclude the 'social' clubs from the new Federation in 1935. Billington-Grieg was a well-known suffragist, member of the Independent Labour Party, founder of the Women's Freedom League and activist who had once been arrested in an affray outside of Asquith's home. She was also a member of the Alpha Club, one of the clubs excluded in 1935 and very much exercised at that meeting about the move. The Provisional Club, in a similar boat because of the change in affiliation rules, included women such as Margaret Haigh Thomas, owner/editor of a political magazine, Helen Archdale, journalist and militant suffragette, and Winifred Cullis, founder of the British Federation of University Women. The tradition of suffragette involvement in the Federation was continued even as late as the 1950's with the Presidency of Vera Laughton Mathews – journalist, suffragette and wartime director of Women's Royal Naval Service.

But there are also links to be made with the wider women's movement in the inter-war period. Beaumont (2000) argues that to restrict the definition of women's groups to only those that identify themselves as overtly feminist is to misrepresent the movement for women's rights in this period.

Instead, the term women's movement should refer to all groups which promoted the social, political and economic rights of women, regardless of whether or not they identified themselves as feminist... the role of mainstream, conservative and mainly middle-class women's societies in local and national affairs is frequently underestimated, and often ignored. (Beaumont, 2000)

If we use this expanded idea of what the women's movement should include then organisations such as the Women's Institute (itself founded by an active suffrage supporter Lady Denman), National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, the National Council of Women, YWCA, the Mother's Union and the Catholic Women's League, must be included in historical accounts of the effort to improve women's social and economic position (Beaumont, 2000). These organisations are perhaps more appropriate models for the British Federation of Professional and Business Women to be compared to rather than the overtly feminist ones. Even at the time of the Women Power Committee, the Federation was mistrusted by some other feminist organisations on the grounds that all they were about were securing good jobs for middle class women. The class issue is one that needs to be grasped because this wasn't an organisation – despite the claims of the British Federation of University Women in 1959 – that ever represented all working women and their interests. The appropriateness of the Federation being considered alongside these organisations is further justified when their role in 'active citizenship' as an ideal is considered, rather than considering them purely as a 'women's rights' organisation. For the very earliest concerns of the Federation were to equip women, not for business life, but for *political* service following the granting of suffrage.

How do the historical forms of women's networks inform our understanding of modern ones?

Another way of using the history of the Federation is to use it as a point of contrast to modern women's business organisations. And I think the closing point of the last section is a good place to start. I mentioned that the earliest concerns of the Federation were to equip women for a life of political citizenship. When suffrage was granted the

fear was that women lacked the political education to enter into public debates and that their exclusion from the political sphere had meant that they were not trained in the skills that would be needed to campaign for, or hold, public office. The early issues of 'Women at Work' not only promoted the opportunities to get involved in the Federation as a way of learning these skills but also reported the successes of individual members that had been elected to public positions.

The international federation's activities were also focused in the immediate pre-war period on the political education needs of women. There were projects comparing the political position of women across the world and also active support for the translation of booklets on political education to be made available throughout UN member states in the post-war period. The training provided by the member organisations was primarily in these 'citizenship' skills and not in skills identified as needed for business life only. Training and education campaigns were based on the belief that women were not being given equitable access to these programmes in line with opportunities for men. I find the assumption of competence in terms of the business and professional skills of the membership quite refreshing. Women were not seen as in need of remedial help in the workplace to succeed – the emphasis instead was on the external barriers to their success.

The other interesting thing that a study of the Federation shows us is how certain organisational forms appear to have an inherently dampening effect on the political activity. An examination of the resolutions passed by the National Federation of Professional and Business Women's Clubs in the same period reveals an organisation that was framing its members concerns in more socially conservative terms than the Federation. For example in 1941, under the heading of 'women in public life', the Clubs voted for a resolution protesting against the substitution of men doctors for women doctors in medical examinations of entrants to the women's services, but only asked that women be considered for appointment to the Colonial Service. And whilst they were vocal on issues of taxation and pensions and for the rights of divorced women they also passed a resolution in 1962 urging the government to amend the Law of Succession in Scotland (Hall, 1963). The geographical spread of the Clubs, as opposed to the Federation and the main offices of many of its major affiliates being in London, made decision making in the Clubs – and in similarly structured

organisations such as the Women's Institutes and Townswomen's Guilds – unwieldy, time-consuming and difficult to obtain consensus on contentious subjects. In contrast, when the Federation heard in the late 1950's that a major clearing bank was about to introduce a marriage bar, one of the Executive Council immediately arranged an appointment with the bank's HR manager and confronted them on the issue. Politically, a group organised along the lines of the Federation, was much more nimble and difficult to manage.

Conclusions

I'm not sure I have many at the moment! As I said in the Introduction, this is a two-part research project and to some extent a lot of what I have been talking about in terms of comparison between historical and contemporary forms needs testing by completing the second half of the project. I also think that the historical aspect of the project is a great stepping off point for other management 'herstories'. The role of women in the public sector in the campaign for Equal Pay, alongside staff groups and women's organisations such as the Federation is also a project that holds some interest for me.

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